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Autor: Pennyfather, Keith
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The Little Line with the Big Views by Keith Pennyfather

The views to be had from the metre-gauge branch line running eastwards from Gais, on the Appenzeller Bahn (AB) network, to Altstätten Stadt must be one of Switzerland's best kept secrets. Though only 5 miles in length, appearing insignificant from the map, and not shown as far as I am aware on any published list of scenic lines, this short journey provides a real surprise, with tremendous views which are both unexpected and out of all proportion to its modest length.

For best effect the line should be travelled from west to east, starting at the Gais end. Reached by a half-hourly service from St Gallen, Gais is a small town in the attractive rolling countryside to the north of the Alpstein massif. The friendly information office at the station, run by the AB, serves also as a shop, a newsagents and a travel agent, and as well as displaying leaflets about facilities offered by the AB network, also provides a very extensive collection of brochures covering local walks and attractions, as well as other tourist information.

On leaving Gais the line follows an incredibly sharp right hand curve before continuing straight ahead to leave the "main" line which disappears off to the right, still on a tight curve, towards Appenzell. Leaving the town there is a short climb of 55 metres to reach the summit of the line at Hebrig (974 metres/3195 ft), the first of seven intermediate halts, all of which are request stops. Now running parallel to a road on the left hand side, the line follows a broad shelf below the wooded Sommersberg ridge, descending only slightly and passing through three more halts, Schachen, Rietli and Stoss. Throughout this stretch there are fine mountain views to the south and south west towards the Säntis and other peaks of the Alpstein massif.

But it is beyond Stoss that the excitement really begins. The road disappears off to the left and the first rack section is reached. As the line now starts to drop from its shelf and starts its descent to the Rhine Valley, views begin to open up to the east and south east, giving a foretaste of what is to come. At the next halt, Kreuzstrasse, where the road reappears and crosses over at a level crossing, the gradient eases and the track levels out for a hundred metres or so. The rack ends briefly here, only to resume again shortly beyond the crossing. Now the steep descent begins in earnest, and for the next two miles, on rack throughout, the line plunges steeply down the hillside through an attractive pastoral landscape of farms, small woods and orchards. On the right hand side the ground falls away steeply, giving an uninterrupted and quite magnificent bird's eye view down to the wide valley of the Rhine far below, with the western Austrian Alps prominent beyond. Directly opposite, across the

Rhine, are the peaks of the Bregenzer Wald and the mountain groups above Feidkirch and further to the right there are excellent views into Liechtenstein, with the peaks of the Rätikon and distant Silvretta as a backcloth. Altogether a tremendous view, made all the more dramatic by the way it suddenly and unexpectedly appears as the train starts to descend on the rack.

Continuing steeply down the mountainside, grinding downhill slowly in the familiar way that all rack lines seem to do, the line passes two more halts, Warmesberg and Alter Zoll, the Rhine valley gradually becoming much nearer now as the distant views recede through foreshortening. Soon after skirting a belt of woodland the line curves sharply to the left, revealing for the first time a view across the town of Altstätten, not far off now. The gradient eases and the rack comes to an end before the train finally glides into the terminus station of Altstätten Stadt. The total descent from the summit of the line at Hebrig has been 505 metres (1657 feet). The line beyond this point has now been abandoned but it originally continued downhill for a further mile through the cobbled streets of the town to the SBB station of Altstätten SG, 39 metres lower down, on the main line from St Gallen via St Margrethen to Sargans and Chur. The link is now provided by an hourly bus connection which is timed to connect with the AB line trains.

An hourly train service operates throughout the day and the journey time from Gais to Altstätten Stadt is 21 minutes. (For some reason the journey uphill is 2 minutes shorter!) The ABIBT Tageskarte, the day ticket which also gives unlimited travel over the rest of the AB network, as well as over the BT line from St Gallen to Herisau, is valid on the branch to Altstätten Stadt. At CHF 25 (or half this price with a Swiss Card or Half Fare Card) this is good value, though the ticket is not widely publicised. During most of the day a single railcar operates the service, being strengthened at peak times, though in rural Switzerland "peak time" is a relative term!

My most recent journey on this line, late afternoon, was enlivened by the train being full of children returning home from school in Gais to the various farmsteads along the line and on this occasion a stop was made at almost each one of the request halts. It was intriguing to see some of the children retrieving and setting off home on bikes they had obviously left earlier in the day just propped up - unlocked - by the waiting shelter on the station platform. What must it be like to grow up in a society where that can safely be done!